

The Danger of I (Another Kind of Birth)

by
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Birth is perpetual suffering. True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea of "I". Mankind's problems reduce to the problem of suffering, whether inflicted by another or by oneself.

Everyday language-Dharma language: In every day language the term birth refers simply to physical birth from a mother's body: in Dharma language birth refers to a mental event arising out of ignorance, craving, and clinging.

Whenever there arises the mistaken idea "I," the "I" has been born; its parents are ignorance and craving.

The kind of birth that constitutes a problem for us is mental birth.

Anyone who fails to grasp this point will never succeed in understanding anything of the Buddha teaching.

The subject we shall discuss today is one, which I feel everyone ought to recognize as pressing, namely the following two statements made by the Buddha:

"Birth is perpetual suffering. (Dukkha jati punappunam)" and

"True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea of 'I'.

(Asmimanassa vinayo etam ve paramam sukham)"

Mankind's problems reduce to the problem of suffering, whether inflicted by another or by oneself by way of mental defilements (kilesa). This is the primary problem for every human being, because no one wants suffering. In the above statements the Buddha equates suffering with birth: "Birth is perpetual suffering"; and he equates happiness with the complete giving up of the false idea "I," "myself," "I am," "I exist".

The statement that birth is the cause of suffering is complex, having several levels of meaning. The main difficulty lies in the interpretation of the word "birth". Most of us don't understand what the word birth refers to and are likely to take it in the everyday sense of physical birth from a mother's body. The Buddha taught that birth is perpetual suffering. Is it likely that in saying this he was referring to physical birth? Think it over. If he was referring to physical birth, it is unlikely that he would have gone on to say: "True happiness consists in eliminating the false idea "I" because this statement clearly indicates that what constitutes the suffering is the false idea "I". When the idea "I" has been completely eradicated, that is true happiness. So suffering actually consists in the misconception "I," "I am," "I have". The Buddha taught: "Birth is perpetual suffering." What is meant here by the word "birth"? Clearly "birth" refers to nothing other than the arising of the idea "I" (asmimana).

The word "birth" refers to the arising of the mistaken idea "I," "myself". It does not refer to physical birth, as generally supposed. The mistaken assumption that this word "birth" refers to physical birth is a major obstacle to comprehending the Buddha's teaching.

It has to be borne in mind that in general a word can have several different meanings according to the context. Two principal cases can be recognized: (1) language referring to physical things, which is spoken by the average person; and (2) language referring to mental things, psychological language, Dharma language, which is spoken by people who know Dharma (higher Truth, Buddha's teaching). The first type may be called "everyday language," the language spoken by the average person; the second may be called "Dharma language," the language spoken by a person who knows Dharma.

The ordinary person speaks as he has learnt to speak, and when he uses the word "birth" he means physical birth, birth from a mother's body; however in Dharma language, the language used by a person who knows Dharma, "birth" refers to the arising of the idea "I am". If at some moment there arises in the mind the false idea "I am," then at that moment the "I" has been born. When this false idea ceases, there is no longer any "I," the "I" has momentarily ceased to exist. When the "I" idea again arises in the mind, the "I" has been reborn. This is the meaning of the word "birth" in Dharma language. It refers not to physical birth from a Mother of flesh and blood but to mental birth from a mental "mother," namely craving, ignorance, clinging (tanha, avija, upadana). One could think of craving as the mother and ignorance as the father; in any case the result is the birth of "I," the arising of the false idea "I". The father and mother of the "I" -delusion are ignorance and craving or clinging. Ignorance, delusion, misunderstanding, give birth to the idea "I," "me". And it is this kind of birth that is perpetual suffering. Physical birth is no problem: once born from his mother; a person need have nothing more to do with birth. Birth from a mother takes only a few minutes; and no one ever has to undergo the experience more than once.

Now we hear talk of rebirth, birth again and again, and of the suffering that inevitably goes with it. Just what is this rebirth? What is it that is reborn? The birth referred to is a mental event, something taking place in the mind—the non-physical side of our make-up. This is "birth" in Dharma language. "Birth" in everyday language is birth from a mother; "birth" in Dharma language is birth from ignorance, craving, clinging, the arising of the false notion of "I" and "mine". These are the two meanings of the word "birth".

This is an important matter, which simply must be understood. Anyone who fails to grasp this point will never succeed in understanding anything of the Buddha's teaching. So do take a special interest in it. There are these two kinds of language, these two levels of meaning: everyday language, referring to physical things, and Dharma language, referring to mental things, and used by people who know. To clarify this point here are some examples.

Consider the word "path". Usually when we use the word "path" we are referring to a road or way along which vehicles, men, and animals can move. But the word "path" may also refer to the Noble Eightfold Path, the way of practice taught by the Buddha - right understanding, right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration -which leads to Nirvana. In everyday language "path" refers to a physical road; in Dharma language it refers to the eightfold way of right practice known as the Noble Eightfold Path. These are the two meanings of the word "path".

Similarly with the word "Nirvana" (nibbāna). In everyday language this word refers to the cooling of a hot object. For example, when hot coals become cool, they are said (in Pali or Sanskrit) to have "nirvana'd"; when hot food in a pot or on a plate becomes cool it has "nirvana'd". This is everyday language. In Dharma language "Nirvana" refers to the kind of coolness that results from eliminating mental defilements. At any time when there is freedom from mental defilements, at that time there is coolness, momentary Nirvana. So "nirvana" or "coolness" has two meanings, according as the speaker is using everyday language or Dharma language.

Another important word is "emptiness" (sunyata, sunnata). In everyday language, the language of physical things, "emptiness" means total absence of any object: in Dharma language it means absence of the idea "I," "mine". When the mind is not grasping or clinging to anything whatsoever as "I" or "mine," it is in a state of "emptiness". The word "empty" has these two levels of meaning, one referring to physical things, the other referring to mental things, one in everyday language, the other in Dharma language. Physical emptiness is absence of any object, vacuum. Mental emptiness is the state in which all the objects of the physical world are present as usual, but none of them is being grasped at or clung to as "mine". Such a mind is said to be "empty". When the mind has come to see things as not worth wanting, not worth being, not worth grasping at and clinging to, it is then an empty of wanting, being, grasping, clinging. The mind is then an empty or void mind, but not in the sense of being void of content. All objects are there as usual and the thinking processes are

going on as usual, but they are not going the way of grasping and clinging with the idea of "I" and "mine". The mind is devoid of grasping and clinging and so is called an empty or void mind. It is stated in the texts: "A mind is said to be empty when it is empty of desire, aversion, and delusion (raga, dosa, moha)." The world is also described as empty, because it is empty of anything that might be identified as "I" or "mine". It is in this sense that the world is spoken of as empty. "Empty" in Dharma language does not mean physically empty, devoid of content.

You can see the confusion and misunderstanding that can arise if these words are taken in their usual everyday sense. Unless we understand Dharma language, we can never understand Dharma; and the most important piece of Dharma language to understand is the term "birth".

The kind of birth that constitutes a problem for us is 'mental birth', the 'birth' or rather the arising of the false notion of "I". Once the idea "I" has arisen, there inevitably follows the idea "I am Such-and-such". For example, "I am a man," "I am a living creature," "I am a good man," "I am not a good man," or something else of the sort. And once the idea "I am Such-and-such" has arisen, there follows the idea of comparison: "I am better than So-and-so," "I am not as good as So-and-so," "I am equal to So-and-so". All these ideas are of a type; they are all part of the false notion "I am," "I exist". It is to this that the term "birth" refers. So in a single day we may be born many times, many dozens of times. Even in a single hour we may experience many, many births. Whenever there arises the idea "I" and the idea "I am Such-and-such," that is a birth. When no such idea arises, there is no birth, and this freedom from birth is a state of coolness. So this is a principle to be recognized: whenever there arises the idea "I," "mine," at that time the cycle of Samsara has come into existence in the mind, and there is suffering, burning, spinning on; and whenever there is freedom from defects of these kinds, there is Nirvana, Nirvana of the type referred to as tadanga- nibbána or vikkhambhana-nibbana.

Tadanga-nibbana is mentioned in the Anguttaranikaya. It is a state that comes about momentarily when external conditions happen, fortuitously, to be such that no idea of "I" or "mine" arises. Tadanga-nibbana is momentary cessation of the idea "I," "mine," due to favorable external circumstances. At a higher level than this, if we engage in some form of Dharma practice, in particular if we develop concentration, so that the idea of "I," "mine" cannot arise, that extinction of "I," "mine" is called vikkhambhana-nibbana. And finally, when we succeed in bringing about the complete elimination of all defilements, that is full Nirvana, total Nirvana.

Now we shall limit our discussion to the everyday life of the ordinary person. It must be understood that at any time when there exists the idea "I," "mine," at that time there exists birth, suffering, the cycle of Samsara. The "I" is born, endures for a moment, then ceases, is born again, endures for a moment, and again ceases-which is why the process is referred to as the cycle of Samsara. It is suffering because of the birth of the "I". If at any moment conditions happen to be favorable, so that the "I"-idea does not arise, then there is peace-what is called tadanga-nibbana, momentary Nirvana, a taste of Nirvana, a sample of Nirvana, peace, coolness.

The meaning of "Nirvana" becomes clearer when we consider how the word is used in the Anguttara-nikaya. In that text we find that hot objects that have become cool are said to have "nirvana'd". Animals that have been tamed, rendered docile and harmless are said to have "nirvana'd". How can a human being become "cool"? This question is complicated by the fact that man's present knowledge and understanding of life has not been suddenly acquired but has evolved gradually over a long period.

Well before the time of the Buddha people considered that Nirvana lay in sensual delight, because a person who gets precisely whatever sensual pleasure he wishes does experience a certain kind of coolness. Having a shower on a hot day brings a kind of coolness; and going into a quiet place brings another kind, in the form of contentment, freedom from disturbance. So to begin with, people were interested in the kind of Nirvana that consisted in an abundance

of sensual pleasure. Later, wiser men came to realize that this was not good enough. They saw that sensual pleasure was largely a deception (maya), so sought their coolness in the mental tranquility of concentration (jhana). The jhanas are states of genuine mental coolness and this was the kind of Nirvana people were concerned with in the period immediately before the Buddha's enlightenment. Gurus were teaching that Nirvana was identical with the most refined state of mental concentration. The Buddha's last guru, Udatatapasa Ramaputta, taught him that to attain the "jhana of neither perception nor non-perception (n'eva sañña n'asannayatana)" was to attain complete cessation of suffering. But the Buddha did not accept this teaching; he did not consider this to be genuine Nirvana. He went off and delved into the matter on his own account until he realized the Nirvana that is the total elimination of every kind of craving and clinging. As he himself later taught: "True happiness consists in eradicating the false idea "I". When defilements have been totally eliminated, that is Nirvana. If the defilements are only momentarily absent, it is momentary Nirvana. Hence the teaching of tadanga-nibbána and vikkhanbhana-nibbana already discussed. These terms refer to a condition of freedom from defilements.

Now if we examine ourselves we discover that we are not dominated by defilements all the time. There are moments when we are free from defilements; if this were not the case we should soon be driven mad by defilements and die, and there would not be many people left in the world. It is thanks to these brief periods of freedom from distress causing defilements that we don't all suffer from nervous disorders and go insane or die. Let us give Nature due credit for this and be thankful she made us in such a way that we get a sufficient period of respite from defilements each day. There is the time we are asleep, and there are times when the mind is clear, cool, at ease. A person who can manage to do as Nature intended can avoid nervous and psychological disorders; one who cannot is bound to have more and more nervous disorders until he becomes mentally ill or even dies. Let us be thankful for momentary Nirvana, the transient type of Nirvana that comes when conditions are favorable. For a brief moment there is freedom from craving, conceit, and false views, in particular, freedom from the idea of "I" and "mine". The mind is empty, free, just long enough to have a rest or to sleep, and so it remains healthy.

In days gone by this condition was more common than it is now. Modern man, with his ever-changing knowledge and behavior, is more subject to disturbance from defilements than man in past ages. Consequently modern man is more prone to nervous and psychological illnesses, which is a disgrace. The more scientific knowledge he has the more prone he is to insanity! The number of psychiatric patients is increasing so rapidly the hospitals can't cope. There is one simple cause for this: people don't know how to relax mentally. They are too ambitious. They have been taught to be ambitious since they were small children. They acquire nervous complaints right in childhood and by the time they have completed their studies they are already mentally disturbed people. This comes from taking no interest in the Buddha's teaching that the birth of the idea of "I" and "mine" is the height of suffering.

Now let us go further into the matter of "birth". No matter what type of existence one is born into, it is nothing but suffering, because the word "birth" refers here to attachment unaccompanied by awareness. This is an important point which must be well understood if there arises in a person's mind the idea "I am Such-and-such" and he is aware that this idea has arisen, that arising is not a birth (as that term is used in Dharma language). If on the other hand he deludedly identifies with the idea, that is birth. Hence the Buddha advised continual mindfulness. If we know what we are, know what we have to do, and do it with awareness, there is no suffering, because there is no birth of "I" or "mine". Whenever delusion, carelessness, and forgetfulness come in, there arise desire and attachment to the false idea "I," "mine," "I am So-and-so," "I am Such-and-such,"...and this is birth.

Birth is suffering and the kind of suffering depends on the kind of birth. Birth as a mother brings the suffering of a mother, birth as a father brings the suffering of a father. If, for example, there arises in a person the illusory idea of being a mother and therefore of wanting this, that, and the other thing -that is the suffering of a mother. It is the same for a father. If he identifies with the idea of being a father, wanting this and that, grasping and clinging -that is the suffering of a father. But if a person has awareness, there is no such confusion and

distortion; he simply knows in full clarity what he has to do as a father or as a mother and does it with a steady mind, not clinging to the idea "I am this". "I am that". In this way he is free from suffering; and in this condition he is fit to rear his children properly and to their best advantage. Birth as a mother brings the suffering of a mother; birth as a father brings the suffering of a father; birth as a millionaire brings the suffering of a millionaire; birth as a beggar brings the suffering of a beggar. What is meant here can be illustrated by the following contrast:

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Suppose first a millionaire, dominated by delusion, desire, attachment, grasping at the idea "I am a millionaire". This idea is in itself suffering: and whatever that man says or does is said and done under the influence of those defilements and so becomes further suffering. Even after he has gone to bed he dwells on the idea of being a millionaire and so is unable to sleep. So birth as a millionaire brings the suffering of a millionaire. Then suppose a beggar dwelling in his misfortunes, his poverty, his sufferings and difficulties -this is the suffering of a beggar. Now if at any moment either of these two men were to be free of these ideas, in that moment he would be free from suffering; the millionaire would be free from the suffering of a millionaire, the beggar would be free from the suffering of a beggar. Thus it is that one sometimes sees a beggar singing happily, because at that time he is not being born as a beggar, is not identifying himself as a beggar or as in any sort of difficulty. For one moment he, has forgotten it, has ceased being born a beggar and instead has been born a singer, a musician. Suppose a poor ferryman. If he clings to the idea of being poor, and rows his ferryboat with a sense of weariness and self-pity, then he suffers, just as if he had fallen straight into hell. But if instead of dwelling on such ideas, he reflects that he is doing what he has to do, that work is the lot of human beings, and does his work with awareness and steadiness of mind, he will find himself singing as he rows his ferryboat.

So do look closely, carefully, and clearly into this question: what is it that is being referred to as birth? If at any moment a millionaire is "born" as a millionaire, in that moment he experiences the suffering of a millionaire; if a beggar is born as a beggar, he experiences the suffering of a beggar. If, however, a person does not identify in this way, he is not "born" and so is free from suffering-whether he is a millionaire, a beggar, a ferryman, or whatever. At the present day we take no interest in this matter. We let ourselves be dominated by delusion, craving, attachment. We experience birth as this, that, or the other, I don't know how many times each day. Every kind of birth without exception is suffering, as the Buddha said. The only way to be free from this suffering is to be free from birth. So one has to take good care, always keeping the mind in a state of awareness and insight, never disturbed and confused by "I" and "mine". One will then be free from suffering. Whether one is a farmer, a merchant, a soldier, a public servant, or anything else, even a god in heaven, one will be free from suffering.

As soon as there is the idea "I" there is suffering. Grasp this important principle and you are in a position to understand the essential core of Buddhism, and to derive benefit from Buddhism, taking full advantage of having been born a human being and encountered Buddhism. If you don't grasp it, then though you are a Buddhist you will derive no benefit from it; you will be a Buddhist only nominally, only according to the records; you will have to sit and weep like all those other people who are not Buddhists; you will continue to experience suffering like a non-Buddhist. To be genuine Buddhists we have to practice the genuine teaching of the Buddha, in particular the injunction: Don't identify as "I" or "mine"; act with clear awareness and there will be no suffering. You will then be able to do your work well, and that work will be a pleasure. When the mind is involved in "I" and "mine," all work becomes suffering; one doesn't feel like doing it; light work becomes heavy work, burdensome in every way. But if the mind is not grasping and clinging to the idea "I," "mine," if it is aware, all work, even heavy or dirty work, is enjoyable.

This is a profound, hidden truth that has to be understood. The essence of it lies in the single word "birth". Birth is suffering; once we can give up being "born," we become free from suffering. If a person experiences dozens of births in a day he has to suffer dozens of times a day; if he does not experience birth at all, he has no suffering at all. So the direct practice of Dharma, the kernel of the Buddha's teaching, consists in keeping close watch on the mind, So that it does not give rise to the condition called the cycle of Samsara, so that it is always in the

state called Nirvana. One has to be watchful, guarding the mind at all times so that the state of coolness is constantly there, and leaving no opportunity for the arising of Samsara. The mind will then become accustomed to the state of Nirvana day and night and that state may become permanent and complete. We already have momentary Nirvana, the type of Nirvana that comes when circumstances are right, the Nirvana that is a sample, a foretaste. Preserve it carefully. Leave no opening for Samsara, for the idea "I," "mine". Don't, let the "I"-idea come to birth. Keep watch, be aware, develop full insight. Whatever you do, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, do it with awareness. Don't become involved in "I" and "mine". Then Samsara will not be able to arise: the mind will remain in Nirvana until it has become fully accustomed to it and unable to relapse-and that is full or complete Nirvana.

Since childhood we have lived in a way favorable to the birth of "I" and "mind," and have become used to the cycle of Samsara. This habit is hard to break. It has become part of our makeup, and so is sometimes called a fetter (samyojana) or a latent disposition (anusaya) something that is bound up in our character. These terms refer to the habit of giving birth to "I," "mine," of producing the sense of "I," "mine". In one form it is called greed (lobha); in another form it is called anger (krodha); in another form it is called delusion (moha). Whatever form it takes it is simply the idea "I," "mine," self-centered-ness. When the "I" wants to get something, there is greed; when it doesn't get that something, there is anger; when it hesitates and doesn't know what it wants, there is confusion, involvement in hopes and possibilities. Greed, anger, and delusion of whatever kind are simply forms of the "I"-idea, and when they are present in the mind, that is everlasting Samsara, total absence of Nirvana. A person in this condition does not live long. But Nature helps. As we saw in the beginning, through natural weariness the process sometimes stops of itself, there is sleep or some other form of respite, and one's condition improves, becomes tolerable, and death is averted.

The various enlightened beings that have appeared in the world have discovered that it is possible to prolong these periods of Nirvana, and have taught the most direct way of practice to this end, namely the Noble Eightfold Path. This is a way of practice intended to prolong the periods of coolness, or Nirvana, and to reduce the periods of suffering, or Samsara, by preventing as far as possible the birth of "I" and "mine". It's so simple it's hard to believe-like the Buddha's statement: "If monks will practice right living, the world will not be empty of Arahants (enlightened beings)."

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